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Why Books Can Be Good For You

- Joshua Landy, How to Do Things with Fictions. New York: Oxford University Press 2012. xiii, 250 p. [Price: EUR 43,99]. ISBN: 978-0195188561.

In his eminently readable and concise new book, Professor Landy has made an important contribution to the increasingly substantial field of literary criticism devoted to theorizing the relationship between ethics and literature. Now entering its second generation, the theoretical movement sometimes called »the ethical turn« remains vibrant, and *How to Do Things with Fictions* will merit a place alongside Martha Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge* and J. Hillis Miller's *The Ethics of Reading* as one of the central texts in this field.[1] Landy admirably masters a massive body of criticism – approximately a third of the book is devoted to footnotes – and carefully distinguishes his notion that fiction can be »formative« from a number of potential alternatives.

He does so especially in the book's first two chapters – the first a theoretical introduction, the second an analysis of Chaucer's »The Nun's Priest's Tale« – provocatively arguing that »It is time, I submit, to reclaim fiction from the meaning-mongers« (8). Landy means here a certain default assumption about how one ought to go about engaging literary texts, exemplified by an undergraduate student who, upon reading Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, expressed frustration that Morrison took so long to get to the point (cf. 1). This attitude, which Landy terms reading for »the message« or for »propositional content« (ibid.) is in his diagnosis pernicious, with negative effects on critics, writers, and readers (cf. 8). Against this view, he seeks to develop an account of the »pragmatics«, instead of the »semantics«, of literature; as he puts it, we could cease »to talk about what a text ›says‹ – if indeed there is such a thing – and [begin] to talk again about what it *does*« (9, emphasis in original). But in developing this view, Landy emphasizes that we need to pay as much attention to what readers want from the texts as what the texts offer: marking out a distinction between his account and Nussbaum's, he explains that readers must want to be developed in a certain way by a text for it to effectively do so. »The Nun's Priest's Tale«, which tells the story of a rooster who ignores a dream that he will be caught by a fox, only to escape from a fox the very next day through the fox's arrogance (after being caught precisely because of his own pride), serves Landy well here. He persuasively argues that the story might serve as a parable for the dangers of conceit, but just as well might serve as a parable for the portentous power of dreams – and whichever moral the reader accepts depends not on the story, but on what the reader already believes plausible (cf. 25). Similarly, while he is content to agree with Nussbaum that fictions can develop our capacity for moral attention, he insists that this will only occur if readers are »predisposed to moral improvement«, and inclined to »come to the text *for* that« (38f., emphasis in original).

As an alternative, Landy develops an account of what he calls »formative fictions« (10). Such works do not offer us propositional knowledge, but rather serve as training exercises for certain specific capacities: »rather than providing knowledge per se«, what such texts »give us is *know-how* […] what they equip us with are *skills*« (ibid.). And in the book's four main chapters – on the Book of Mark, Stéphane Mallarmé, Plato, and Samuel Beckett, respectively – Landy goes on to show how the formal features of the texts serve not to convey a set of propositions, but rather to appeal to and subsequently develop a certain faculty on the part of the reader. Cleverly, Landy shows how the formative function depends precisely on the reader looking past the actual propositional content of the literary text.

Thus, for instance, he notes the peculiar fact that despite the common notion that Jesus used parables to make his meaning clear, Christ's parables in the Book of Mark often serve precisely to confuse the point – and indeed, the reactions to the parables in Mark's description are often confusion, as the disciples are often »completely at a loss« (47). The problem is that such people are trying to understand the parables in propositional terms, when they are in fact deliberately obscure: Landy emphasizes the surprising fact that Christ himself says he speaks »so that they [the listeners] may […] hear but not understand; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven«, which is to say that parables function precisely to »prevent people from understanding them« (ibid.). The right reaction, which is possible only from the few people who have a certain capacity, is found in the parable of the »Syrophoenician Woman«, who crucially answers an obscure metaphor from Christ with another metaphor. Put succinctly, the right reaction is not translation but production – namely, of figurative language. This leads to Landy's depiction of a »formative circle«, which is structured to parallel the hermeneutic circle: readers have a certain capacity – to speak figuratively, for example – and the formative text affects them by developing it. And if in the Book of Mark there is a connection between this capacity and spiritual affinity, Landy provocatively suggests that there might be something of secular value in the notion of a »figurative state of mind«.

The book is at its best generally in its patient and scrupulously documented explanation of how tortured critical interpretations can become when they insist on reading for a coherent propositional content, and how simply and easily the formative account can explain the complexities such interpretations cannot acknowledge. Of course this emerges first in the reading of Mark, where Landy takes some pains to acknowledge and refute the long tradition that insists Jesus Christ wanted to be understood, but a similarly impressive example is his discussion of Plato. Landy notes Socrates's famous argument that no man can willingly pursue what he believes to be bad, but then calls our attention to the way Plato depicts people doing precisely this – in the case of the *Symposium*, Alcibiades, who in a final speech claims that Socrates makes him realize the worthlessness of his »political career«, but then can't bring himself to give it up (98). He then develops a provocative reading emphasizing not Socrates's coherence – he painstakingly demonstrates the failures of readings that attempt to synthesize Socrates's statements – but precisely Socrates's failures. In this way, Landy suggests, Plato is ironic: the reader is meant to recognize in characters like Alcibiades examples that contradict Socrates's own psychological theory. And thus we miss the invitation Plato offers when we try to read the texts coherently; what they rather ask us to do is disagree with Socrates precisely the way he disagrees with others. Thus, the text does not teach us – indeed, we will get it wrong if we require it to do so. Rather, it trains us in a particular kind of discourse. And this way of reading Plato explains precisely why his dialogues are so complicated and contradictory in the first place.

There are a number of theoretical virtues to Landy's approach. It is first of all admirably localized: Landy admits that not every text is a formative fiction. And as he persuasively notes, this humility in claiming to only explain certain literary texts rather than the literary as such is a virtue rather than a weakness (cf. 17). Second, as Landy again emphasizes, this account can explain why readers might re-read a text, since they are being trained by it; this is in contrast to the »propositional content theory«, which cannot explain why readers might return to a text whose message they have mastered (14). Finally, Landy can address perhaps the central problem in thinking about ethics and literature – namely, why reading books doesn't always make people better. After all, for Landy, books operate formatively only on those readers prepared for them to do so.

Alongside these strengths, however, there are some genuine problems. First, Landy's account of the current state of the field and his positioning of his argument within it is importantly incomplete. The book opens with an impressive chart of theorists who have addressed the benefits of reading fiction, whom Landy sorts into three primary categories and thirteen total ways of »looking at a fiction«. What is confusing about this list is that it is neither of Landy's enemies nor precisely his allies, but rather something like alternatives to his view; he counts »over a dozen non-message-based theories« (6). The position that needs the most explanation – the reader who attends to propositional content, or the »meaning-monger« whom Landy will criticize throughout the book – receives surprisingly short shrift: two footnotes refer briefly to mid-twentieth-century figures like Jean-Paul Sartre, Ian Watt, Iris Murdoch, and a few others (cf. 153). Rather than substantively grounding the view in a charitably represented critical opponent, Landy speaks of this reading strategy as the one »currently being taught in high schools« and »evaluated in the public domain« (8); his citation for these claims refers to Jennifer Lopez's speech at the 2006 Academy Awards (cf. 153). Similarly, he suggests that there is a »contemporary cultural bias« that decrees »every book« as »valuable for its message« (120). Given, however, his opening categorization, which demonstrates the flowering of theories of fiction that do not emphasize the way it conveys a message, it is difficult to agree with Landy's broad generalization that this is what most readers are up to: certainly in the critical academy Landy taxonomizes, much the opposite would appear to be true.

The problem is made more noticeable by Landy's failure to engage much of the secondary criticism on the ethical turn. The point at the center of Landy's argument, that critics need to stop reading for the message of literary texts, is one that has been made before, and made in this particular debate: Adam Zachary Newton developed his »narrative ethics« in contrast to theories that emphasize the »translated meaning of the literary text«; Simon Haines has criticized philosophers who read such texts for their »reformulable ideas«; and David Parker wrote recently that the ethical value of literature does not lie »in ethical propositions that can be gleaned from it«.[2] This is to say shortly that literature has already been rescued from the meaning-mongers, and there is no need to do it again. Landy's approach may be new – indeed, I think it is – but the problem that drove him to it, which is his sense that unsophisticated critics were reading for messages rather than form, is one that theorists have been thinking about for some time. And rather than situating his account against philosophers like Heidegger and Hegel (who receive a place in his categories) it would be clearer what was new about Landy's approach if he had distinguished it from that of other participants in the ethical turn, authors like Newton and Parker.

And as a theoretical matter, Landy's central concept of the »formative« appears vulnerable to some of the objections he presses against his rivals. For instance, in arguing against the notion that literary texts reliably develop the moral abilities of their readers, he relies on the fact that there is »only shaky empirical evidence that well-intentioned art actually makes a difference in how people act« (33). But it seems to me that Landy's account similarly relies on dubious empirical claims: for instance, in describing the formative circle, he has to posit that there is a mental faculty for generating figurative language, and that it can reliably be improved by reading certain texts (A footnote gestures at this problem without solving it: Landy says he is »leaving open« the way analyses of the brain would understand such a faculty, and refers to one 1978 psychology paper on »metaphoric competence« as an example of the sort of study needed rather than as one supporting his more specific claim; see 173 n. 68). The problem is complicated by the fact that the »capacities« the development of which Landy analyzes in his four chapters are not parallel entities. As I understand it, they are our capacity for generating figurative language (Mark), our capacity to engage in a willful self-delusion that re-enchants the world (Mallarmé), our ability to understand the inconsistencies in a theoretical position

(Plato), and our desire for a certain kind of philosophical self-contentedness (Beckett). Since these are not obviously the same sort of psychological items, empirical verification for any one – suppose for example that reading Plato with an eye towards irony really did make one more capable of seeing tensions in philosophical views and ways to resolve them – would suggest little about the relationship between literary texts and the other capacities.

And finally, it is not quite clear why, if it is training in these capacities one wants, close reading of literature is the thing most worth doing. Professor Landy's argument offers an excellent reason why reading literature is preferable to reading discursive, propositional treatments of the relevant issues: in their difficulty, the literary texts offer »training«, instead of merely teaching (19). But what is not clear is why training through literature is preferable to other forms of training, period. The problem here is most discernible *vis-à-vis* the example of Plato: it seems to me we could concede to Landy that Plato's texts train readers in the ability to »locate holes in an argument« (118), and yet hold that if this was the primary reason to read Plato, one had much better spend the time actually talking with a philosopher, who could notice the strengths and weaknesses of a given student in this area and respond accordingly much more easily than Plato could. In other words, if Landy is right that what we want is training, it is not clear to me that this results in much reason to read literature at all.

So for these reasons, I do not think that the book is quite successful in achieving its aims. But its intervention in these debates is nevertheless one that cannot be ignored, and deserves credit for moving the broader arguments a good distance forward. I am eager to see how Professor Landy's thinking about these matters develops.

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Notes

[1] Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, New York 1992; J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading*, New York 1987.

[2] Adam Zachary Newton, *Narrative Ethics*, Cambridge, MA 1997, 65; Simon Haines, Deepening the Self: The Language of Ethics and the Language of Literature, in: Jane Adamson et al. (eds.), *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*, New York 1998, 21–38, 24; David Parker, *Ethics, Theory, and the Novel*, Cambridge 1994, 17. I address this issue as well in my essay »In Defense of Paraphrase«, which is forthcoming in *New Literary History*.

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